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**Date deposited:**

16/06/2017

**Embargo release date:**

11 May 2019



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# Performing Mass Murder: Constructing the Perpetrator in Documentary Film

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The massacre, torture, persecution, and imprisonment of real and imagined communists and sympathizers in mid-1960s Indonesia was among the greatest state-sponsored atrocities of the twentieth century and yet remains little known and even less understood outside Indonesia. An elaborate mythology about the supposed communist coup attempt of September 1965 was foundational to the military government's legitimacy discourses. The dead, the tortured, and the imprisoned remained an existential threat to Indonesia's survival according to these discourses, and yet they could not be spoken of, or acknowledged in broader social discourses, without fear of retribution from the state. This article explores one attempt to break the silence surrounding the massacres and to make visible the suffering of millions of Indonesians; it does so through an analysis of the documentary film, *The Act of Killing*, in which a number of those involved in mass murder re-enact their killings. It explores the contribution of the film to understanding the politics of mass murder through an interrogation of the history it purports to address and through the methods employed by filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer. It concludes that while the film is a singular achievement, it fails as a political intervention aimed at deepening understanding of the mass killings.

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On the night of September 30, 1965, the Author's note: The author would like to thank the many people who provided feedback and comment on earlier drafts of this work at conferences, workshops and seminars in the UK, US and Indonesia. I owe particular thanks to Martin Coward, Matt Davies, Kyle Grayson, David Mutimer and Laura Routley. IPS anonymous reviewers also provided invaluable feedback and ideas for improving the argument and I am thankful for their insights that cemented the dynamics for a period of mass political violence. Real and imagined communists and their sympathizers, one of Indonesia's three political modernizing streams, were purged, resulting in the deaths of somewhere between 500,000 and 1,000,000 people and the persecution of millions more (see Cribb [2001]). The killing, carried out by army special forces, militia, and other social groups, was largely completed between October 1965 and March 1966. In the aftermath, a Western-backed military regime emerged under the presidency of Suharto, who was to remain in office until 1998. However, the mass murder and persecution, despite being one of the more significant political atrocities of

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the twentieth century, remains little known outside Indonesia (see [Tanter \[2002\]](#), [Roosa \[2016, 282–83\]](#)). No one has ever been prosecuted for their part in these events, and no apology to those affected has been made.

In the wake of Suharto's fall and the gradual opening and democratization of the Indonesian polity, there have been several attempts to begin a process of debate and reflection on the events of the mid-1960s. Abdurrahman Wahid, Indonesian president from 1999 to 2001 and former head of Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), attempted to legalize Marxism-Leninism as a first step in dealing with NU's own involvement in the massacres but was thwarted by strong opposition to his move ([Sears 2014, 206](#)). Aging survivors, who in 2005 brought a (unsuccessful) class action against all Indonesian presidents, were harassed and intimidated by anti-communist activists. The attorney general threatened to ban school textbooks that had been revised to provide a more balanced interpretation of the events of 1965–1966 if they did not adopt approved nomenclature. In 2012, a substantial investigation of the violence, completed by the National Commission of Human Rights under the auspices of the Indonesian parliament, became the subject of controversy after protests were raised by an important Islamic organization ([McGregor 2016, 252–54](#)). More recently, toward the end of his second (and final) term in office, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was widely expected to make an apology for the massacres as part of his independence day address in August 2012. Again, under extensive pressure from anti-communist groups, such plans were quietly shelved ([McGregor 2014, 191](#)). These abandoned attempts to address the mass violence of the mid-1960s tend to confirm Vanessa Hearman's observation that victims have a code of silence imposed upon them, but such silences are not gaps in communication; rather, they are "social products with particular genealogies, in this case 'the cultural work of the state' in managing both history and representation of the 1965 events" ([Hearman 2014, 174](#)).

It is the inability of those affected by persecution to speak of their own reality that prompted Joshua Oppenheimer to make *The Act of Killing* (henceforth TAOK) (2012). The documentary has prompted debate among Indonesians,<sup>1</sup> brought awareness of the massacres to a wider international audience than was hitherto the case, and provoked a great deal of commentary about the merits of the film in Indonesian studies circles. The key dramatic device in TAOK is Oppenheimer's choice (largely of necessity, given that he was routinely stymied in his attempts to focus on victims and survivors of the massacres and persecution) to focus the film on the perpetrators of the killings. The affective impact of the film arises from the boastful re-enactments of the killings that Oppenheimer facilitates. That is, the killers he engages with willingly discuss their crimes and recreate them through a range of genre films they make within the documentary itself. Viewers watch as former perpetrators of mass murder re-enact their activities in noir, Western, supernatural, and gangster genres. The result is a stunning documentary achievement on the part of Oppenheimer, but one is left with significant anxieties, not just about the braggadocio of the killers but about Oppenheimer's presentation of a political history rather more complex than he permits viewers to see.

This article undertakes several tasks. First, it interrogates the idea that there was a broad silence around the killings in mid-1960s Indonesia, and looks in particular at claims that there was no international media coverage at the time of the massacres. In this case, silence does not equate with an absence of reportage but rather is a silence born of contempt for the victims. Second, ~~I aim to~~ analyze

<sup>1</sup>After a controlled release that was designed to defeat likely banning by censors in Indonesia, Oppenheimer made the film freely available to Indonesians on YouTube on September 30, 2013. As of November 2016, the film has had just under one million viewings.

TAOK as an artifact that is concerned with explanation of mass murder. An examination of how, if at all, the film contributes insight into mass killing will be undertaken with reference to the ambitions of *cinéma-vérité*, given that Oppenheimer has likened his documentary practice to one of the founders of the genre, Jean Rouch. The commitment to exposing hidden truths goes a long way to explaining Oppenheimer's psychological profile of his key interlocutor, Anwar Congo. Third, Oppenheimer has been explicit that his film is to be understood as a direct provocation, not just to Indonesians but to Western governments and other allies of the Suharto regime to acknowledge and apologize for the killings and persecution. Oppenheimer presents an unreformed Indonesian state in which the heirs to the mass murderers have secured the state against claims for recognition and even reparation, while some surviving killers are publicly celebrated for saving the nation from communism. In this Indonesia, attempts to broach the atrocities continue to face hostile resistance underpinned by a deep state consensus.

My conclusions are ambivalent. The film as a documentary artifact is a singular achievement, perhaps unique. While it forms part of a recent trend to delve into mass killing from the perspective of perpetrators, it is difficult to assess whether viewers can get much beyond the unreconstructed conduct of the killers they meet in the film. This has important consequences for how viewers, unfamiliar with Indonesia may come to view the country. Arguably, any appreciation of Indonesia that is based on lazy approaches to the ways the Islamic other is encountered may simply have such prejudices confirmed by the film. Ultimately, I conclude that the film fails as a meaningful political intervention, not because it blunders in presenting mass killing as ordinary, but because it evacuates politics from its account of the events of 1965–1966. This is a flaw that greatly undermines the film, in my view.

### The Invisible Genocide: The Indonesian Mass Killings and Media Coverage

In Indonesian and (to a lesser extent) genocide studies, there are ongoing debates about the massacres in Indonesia and why they are so little known outside Indonesia (Roosa 2016, 283). Arguably, because Indonesia's post-massacre military regime aligned itself to the anti-communist Cold War cause and opened its doors to Western foreign investment, the manner of its emergence was largely unremarked by Western governments (McGregor 2016, 244). There was very little sympathy for massacred communists at a time when the United States and its allies were rapidly escalating the war in Vietnam, which itself contributed to highly negative perceptions of communism and communists in the West. Asian communists were very likely beyond the pale in much the same way that loathing of the Japanese was explicitly intensified through a racial logic in the lead-up to WWII (Tapsell 2008, 213–15; Porter 2009, 50; McGregor 2014, 189).

That the murdered were often poor, rural people, as well as allegedly communist, perhaps goes some way to explaining the lack of interest in Western polities. But at least some intelligence agencies and government departments were attentive and had a grasp on events. The Australian PM, Harold Holt, knew enough of them to be able to joke in New York in July 1966 that "With around 100,000 communist sympathizers being knocked off, I think it is safe to say a re-orientation has taken place." Interestingly, while Tapsell cites a number of 100,000, it would appear that Holt actually said 500,000 to 1,000,000, suggesting that he had very good information even though the killings were only just winding down at the time he addressed his audience (see, for example, Tanter [2002]). *Time* magazine opined that the physical liquidation of the PKI was "the West's best news in Asia for years" (Tapsell 2008, 223).

And yet the extent to which the massacres were reported in, for example, the Australian media remains contested. Tapsell notes that Australian journalists of

the time argued that the problem with reporting on the mass killings was practical. That is:

They argue that the limited news coverage of the killings at the time arose because of the practical difficulties that they encountered on the ground, rather than any failure of objectivity on their part. The constraints which prevented a more extensive coverage were not due to the ideological nature of the press, nor a product of government pressure. (Tapsell 2008, 218)

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Relying on memoirs and interviews he conducted with retired journalists, Tapsell notes that all claimed it was difficult to report on the massacres because physical evidence of them was hard to find. Some journalists saw a few bodies here and there, but nothing on the scale that would enable them to report massacres. Moreover, Indonesian witnesses to the massacres remained fearfully silent and were reluctant to speak to journalists. Journalists themselves were subjected to intimidating treatment that made them fear for their own safety and that of their informers in the event they reported contentious stories (Tapsell 2008, 218–19). But Tapsell also notes that the memoirs of journalists who were in Indonesia at the time of the killings, some published just after the events and some much more recently, are notable for the far greater detail that they go into about the massacres when compared to their reporting of the time. In each case, journalists claim that their memoirs are based on information they gathered while in Indonesia and not on material that subsequently came to their attention (Tapsell 2008, 220–21). The discrepancy speaks interestingly to the problems not only of memory but the tensions between bearing witness, professional conduct, and corporate responsibility.

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In an earlier article, Richard Tanter presented an alternative account of reportage from Indonesia during the massacres. Tanter reviewed each edition of two newspapers from Harold Holt's home city of Melbourne for eleven months from October 1, 1965: the *Sun-Herald*, at the popular end of reportage, and the broadsheet journal of record, *The Age*. In both, Tanter finds almost daily accounts of Indonesia but across that eleven months only a few articles that directly mention the killings. In the main, even when obliquely referenced, the violence occurred in the passive voice and with no obvious agents ("the violence which swept Indonesia ... which resulted in the death of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands"). When this pattern was broken with comments about fanatical Muslims running amok in a state of blood lust, the well-established pattern in the Australian media of reporting Indonesia as bizarre, dangerous, unbalanced, irrational, and violent was reinforced (Tanter 2002). Tanter concludes that the silence in the Australian media about the mass murder "is the point where anti-communism, the demands of the national security state, and ... a deep measure of racism, fused to smother and then sever the connection to a shared humanity and moral responsibility" (Tanter 2002). On this reading, journalists, editors, and media owners took it upon themselves to protect their readers from the need to confront the political and moral questions arising from the genocide being undertaken in Australia's second-nearest neighbor (Tanter 2002).

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Karim Najjarine and Drew Cottle (2003) reach similar conclusions in their analysis of the interaction between the Australian Broadcasting Commission's Radio Australia, the Department of External Affairs, and senior Australian diplomatic officials in Indonesia. They note a history of tension between the Department of External Affairs and Radio Australia as broadcasts into Indonesia became more critical in the wake of the coup attempt. In ongoing efforts to frame events in Indonesia, the Australian ambassador provided narrative "advice" to Radio Australia as to the preferred content and tone of its broadcasts. Najjarine and Cottle argue that "Australian information policy towards Indonesia in the months following the attempted coup was ideologically directed and designed to assist the

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Army under General Suharto to assume power throughout the country.” Indeed, the Department of External Affairs unsuccessfully endeavored to bring Radio Australia under its control (Najjarine and Cottle 2003, 53–55).

Benedict Anderson notes that, in the last months of 1965, American journalists framed the conflict as a popular fury unleashed by the supposed bestiality of the PKI and described a vengeful, primitive population that had run amok. “The military’s propagandists employed this idea, describing the Army’s role as curbing and calming down this wave of ‘spontaneous’ popular violence.” However, such an approach ignores the evidence that the killing can be mapped onto the movement of red beret wearing commandos from one place to another (Anderson 2012, 281–82). The West German press also enthusiastically welcomed the mass violence and uncritically accepted the Indonesian army’s version of events (Schaefer 2013, 101). In 1966, the French liberal daily *Le Monde* presented the emerging Suharto as a selfless patriot and so conformed to the widespread view that the military was a force for stabilization and rationality (see Schütte [2013]).

However, there are other contributing factors to knowledge of the massacres being limited beyond Indonesia. First, much of the killing was carried out secretly. John Roosa argues that the killings took place at night in secret locations and, as such, perpetrators, military and militia, understood they were engaged in clandestine work. The army leadership did not publicly speak of the killings. There was little or no reporting of the massacres in the Indonesian media. These factors helped make it clear that the killing should not enter the public record (Roosa 2014, 179; 2016, 290). Second, the Indonesian state continues to suppress public discussion of these events. When the massacres are raised, the state has resorted to the usual tactics of perpetrators: “minimize the number of casualties, claim that people on both sides were equally harmed, allege the victims were the aggressors, shift blame to other groups of perpetrators, assure everyone that nothing good will come of reopening old wounds” (Roosa 2014, 179). Third, guilt for the killing was spread as widely as possible, providing further incentives for people to “forget.” As is common in genocide, the authorities, in this case the Indonesian military, ensured that as many people as possible were implicated in the killings, which also served to force people to declare themselves for or against the communists by participating in the killings or not (Cribb 2001, 236–37). As Philip Gourevitch, in his account of the Rwandan genocide, argues, “[i]f everyone is implicated, then implication becomes meaningless. Implication is what? A Hutu who thought there was anything to be implicated in would have to be an accomplice of the enemy” (Gourevitch 1999, 96).

Finally, the PKI leadership and membership was unarmed and so had no capacity to defend itself once the military moved decisively against it. Nor did it have access to any media in which to mount a narrative counteroffensive that challenged the version of events laying the blame for the murder of the generals at the feet of the party. Hundreds of thousands of PKI members, followers, and affiliates went with little resistance to their deaths, in keeping with their “abject powerlessness” (Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo 2009, 94). Indeed, Robert Cribb argues that passivity in the face of death is not uncommon in genocides and that in the Indonesian case there were reports of victims in North Sumatra forming “long, acquiescent lines at a river’s edge while they awaited to be decapitated” (Cribb 2001, 233).

The problem of PKI passivity is complicated by its relationship to the question of guilt. Some observers have argued that passivity implied acknowledgement of guilt, and have suggested the meekness in the face of destruction was the party’s admission that it had erred. The party, of course, was neatly pinned in a no-win situation by this kind of argument: if it did not fight, it acknowledged its guilt, if it did fight, then its guilt was proven. Passivity is so frequently reported in stories of the



Indonesian massacres that it probably was indeed the typical response of victims, but the most plausible explanation is that victims were paralysed by that combination of uncertainty and vague hope which makes acquiescence right until the very last moment always seem wiser than resistance. (Cribb 1990, 35)

These are among the factors that explain why the massacres are little known outside Indonesia and the long official silence within Indonesia. There was little sympathetic reportage in the liberal Western media, and in the atmospherics of the Cold War little incentive for media consumers to delve more deeply into what reporting there was. The lack of acknowledgment, accountability, and prosecutions means that perpetrators continue to live freely among survivors and their families. It is this impunity that motivated Joshua Oppenheimer to make his unique film.

### The Genocide Film/Documentary: ~~Film as a Medium~~

The Nazi Holocaust has generated an enormous number of documentary and popular cinematic accounts of mid-twentieth-century German mechanized mass murder. While documentary accounts such as *Night and Fog* (1955) and *Shoah* (1985) (possibly the two most highly regarded documentary accounts of Nazi policy) are somber, confronting, and chilling in their portrayal of the intellectual rationale and practical policy outcomes of the planned extermination of Europe's Jews and others the German regime persecuted, at least some of the tens of other cinematic accounts of these events are presented as entertainment, even (black) comedy: *Life Is Beautiful* (1997) and *Inglourious Basterds* (2009).

More recently, popular cinema has turned its attention to a portrayal of the be-nighted events of Rwanda in the mid-1990s. Films like *Shooting Dogs* (2006) and *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) reduce the Rwandan genocide to a series of personal tragedies played out in circumstances of unfathomable morality. These two films also recount actual events and, in the case of the former, makes use of survivors in minor acting roles and as production crew, and is filmed on location. Told from the point of view of the victims and those aiding them, these films invite a shocked response on the part of the viewer and channel one's empathy to the victims of mass slaughter and other genocidal acts. These films and others, such as *Schindler's List* (1993) or *The Pianist* (2002), provide a space "where viewers can leave the theatre having shed a cathartic tear, feeling their emotional response equivalent to having 'gained awareness' or 'done something' about genocide" (Dwyer 2014, 183–84). As Brown and Rafter argue, such cinematic offerings commonly invoke "genocidal background contexts to create sweeping, often melodramatic narratives with sweeping conclusions that neatly rework the past into a more comforting present" (Brown and Rafter 2013, 1019). In replaying particular genocidal events that supposedly provide an experience of them to the viewer, such films adopt simple narrative structures of heroes and villains, reconciliation and recuperation, closure and justice. Atrocity is assigned to memory and history, and viewers are comforted with the idea that these events are locked in a remote past, making the present both bearable and free of the need for interrogation of genocide (Brown and Rafter 2013, 1020). Sylvia Tiwon's concerns run yet deeper. Discussing the lynching of African Americans, she argues that aestheticizing public forms of violence in the visual arts has led to the commercialization of atrocity and created a safe space of aesthetic distance between the atrocity and the beholder. On this view, the victim of racial violence is transformed into an aesthetic object and, so, a locus that generates white subjectivity (Tiwon 2014, 201). In a different context, Walter Benjamin complained of how certain artistic, literary, and photographic traditions turned political struggle from a compelling motive for decision into an object of comfortable contemplation (see Carrabine [2012, 477]). The same might be said of commercially oriented genocide films.

Prior to the turn of the twenty-first century, only a minimal number of documentaries dealt with perpetrators of mass murder. These include *The Eichmann Trial* (1961), *Hotel Terminus* (1988) (Klaus Barbie), *The Specialist* (1999) (Adolf Eichmann), and parts of *Shoah* (1985). But since the millennium there have been many more, including a number that examine the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Nichols 2014, 81). There are some common themes in these films that, for my purposes, include important questions: How can terrible crimes be shown and discussed in ways that are not exploitative of victims and voyeuristic on the part of the viewer? How can the remorse and trauma of perpetrators and victims be explored ethically and in ways that might contribute to reconciliation? How can the crimes of perpetrators be represented in documentaries in ways that blur the simple binary between perpetrator and victim? How can we understand the relationship between individual perpetrator and the role of the state or other authority that both author and authorize mass murder?

Arguably, the documentary, or what one of its founders, John Grierson, famously described as “the creative treatment of actuality,” is the form that has the most to offer in coming to terms with, and better understanding, the dynamics that lead to mass murder in a given polity (Hardy 1966, 13). Brown and Rafter argue that visual accounts of genocide are not just unavoidable given the ubiquity of the image in contemporary culture, but that some genocide films provide an opportunity to analyze and interrogate the “meanings that will enter collective memory and historical consciousness” (Brown and Rafter 2013, 1019). Critical, documentary accounts in particular, wrestle with issues of ethical representation, strive for ambivalence, resist premature closure, and seek to disorient their audiences such that the potential for transition from spectatorship to witness may be realized (Brown and Rafter 2013, 1020). There is, though, nothing inevitable about the power of documentary film to fulfill these ambitions, despite the heavy burden of expectation for transformation that resides in the practice (Torchu in Brown and Rafter [2013, 1019–20]).

There have been very many approaches to genocide in film, including animation, which Brian Winston argues has enormous possibilities because there is “no journalistic subterfuge of transparency, no voyeurism and, positively, of course it allows the visualisation of ... the ‘unreachable’” (Winston 2012, 114). Genocide documentaries are largely located in the truth-telling or truth-seeking practices of archival research, testimony collection and analysis, photojournalism, and investigative reportage (Brown and Rafter 2013, 1020). However, it is important to recognize the limits of this kind of approach to documentary film. Citing Derrida, Michael Renov argues:

One of the dreams of positivism in the human sciences is the distinction, even the opposition, between interpretation—subjective, vulnerable, ultimately arbitrary—and description, a certain and definitive activity. (Renov 1993, 13)

Not only are the formal practices within documentary film-making historically and politically contingent, the very practice itself is highly politicized and as such the texts it produces are as open to interrogation as any. (Renov 1993, 19, 16)

Bill Nichols describes it as follows:

documentaries were always forms of re-presentation, never clear windows on to “reality”; the film-maker was always a participant-witness and an active fabricator of meaning, a producer of cinematic discourse rather than a neutral or all-knowing reporter of the way things really are. (Nichols 1983, 18)

Indeed, Michael Renov approvingly cites Clifford Geertz, who observed of his own anthropological practice that he never got anywhere near the bottom of anything he researched. Cultural analysis, observed Geertz, “is intrinsically incomplete.” If



this is true of the scholar, asks Renov, how much more so for the documentarist who must adapt to the “contours of the cultural marketplace and a capital-intensive mode of production”? (Renov 1993, 30–31).

Debates concerning objectivity, its desirability as an ambition, and how to achieve it have been fundamental to the development of documentary film practice from its earliest days. Cinéma-vérité, observational cinema, and direct cinema have all been profoundly concerned with the relationship between the subjects and subject of filmmaking and filmmaker. Debates on the question of objectivity have been notably sharp. For example, Emile de Antonio observed:

Cinéma vérité is ... a lie ... a childish assumption about the nature of film. Cinéma vérité is a joke. Only people without feelings or convictions could even think of making cinéma vérité. I happen to have strong feelings and some dreams and my prejudice is under and in everything I do. (de Antonio in Bruzzi [2006, 67])

It is around issues of objectivity that documentary film perhaps departs from photojournalism in important ways. While documentary filmmakers and photojournalists are similarly anchored in the socio-political context in which they work, they may address different aspects of audience curiosity and expectation. For example, writing of photography, Susie Linfield argues that “we” do not turn to photography for understanding and solutions to entrenched problems but for glimpses of what a range of human emotions and actions, including political violence, look like. “We” turn to photographs to explore our own intuitive reactions. “We” “approach photographs, first and foremost, through emotions” (Linfield 2010, 22). Despite the caveats offered above, documentary filmmaking differs from photography in that it is concerned to relay something of the world as it is or was and often to challenge settled understandings of particular issues. If, as Brown and Rafter (2013) claim, genocide is “the crime of crimes,” then arguably the burden on filmmakers is particularly heavy as they navigate the tensions between, effectively, storytelling and respectful, ethical, sensitive relating of the events to which they refer. While it is not the primary purpose of this particular research to explore in depth the history of documentary film’s genres and developments (and the development of documentary film practice is as much related to technological development as social change), I do want to acknowledge that the documentarist of genocide should be as free to explore his or her material as any other filmmaker. Indeed, it may be that mass killing, in both its ordinariness and its marginality to the human condition, demands of documentary particularly creative and innovative approaches to make strange its ordinariness and make ordinary its extremes. For, as Bill Nichols notes, “perpetrators are not the psychopaths of much popular culture ... [t]hey learn to commit atrocities and come to accept them as either the byproduct of a broader, legitimate task ... or as the fulfilment of their dedication and belief” (Nichols 2014, 82).

However, convention busting in genocide documentaries is difficult. As Vanessa Hearman notes, with respect to expectations of advocacy created by such films:

The “audiovisual testimonial scene” is one of the most common and geopolitically significant venues for the “attestation, mitigation and reception of social suffering” ... The presence of the “talking head” suggests authenticity and at the same time enables us, the audience, to respond to this suffering. (Hearman 2014, 172)

The burden on survivors is magnified in some circumstances by the absence of any other visual testimony. For example, Winston notes the clandestine, unrecorded, un-filmed rampage of Nazi forces in Latvia in 1941–1942, during which a killing occurred every thirty seconds for fifteen months or so, but of which there is almost no photographic or cinematic record. What images do exist are tasked with “having to meet the standards of criminal evidential truth” (Winston 2012, 98–99).

Renov suggests there are four tendencies in documentary filmmaking: 1) to record, reveal, or preserve; 2) to persuade or promote; 3) to analyze or interrogate; 4) to express (Renov 1993, 21). The tendencies are not in themselves mutually exclusive. To record, reveal, or preserve is the most elemental of impulses within documentary filmmaking and is to be found at the very origins of the practice. It is “the creation of a second-order reality cut to the measure of our desire” (Renov 1993, 25). Persuasion is the mode of filmmaking with its genealogy in the work of John Grierson, polemical and activist, with the film a hammer to shape and change the (political) issues that it addresses (Renov 1993, 29). Citing Brecht, Renov notes that the measure of an artwork is its capacity to activate audiences. Thus, analysis entails revelation interrogated. Recognizing that mediational structures do more than provide pleasing aesthetics, films that make explicit their own processes are more “likely to engender the healthy skepticism that begets knowledge, offering itself as a model” (Renov 1993, 30–31). The expressive is the aesthetic dimension in documentary filmmaking, which is as common as it is undervalued. Work that innovates or challenges should in no way be removed from serious consideration as a documentary, according to Renov, who argues that “the communicative aim is frequently enhanced by attention to the expressive dimension” (Renov 1993, 32, 35).

*Night and Fog* and *Shoah*, the two genocide documentaries most widely recognized for setting genre conventions, approach the same genocide in different ways. In the former film, director Alain Resnais establishes a jarring visual economy of contrasts between the camps as they were when in use and as he found them in 1955, abandoned, being reclaimed by nature and occasionally bathed in weak sunshine. The innovation of industrialized slaughter required of Resnais a corresponding novelty in his approach to documenting atrocity. This was achieved through the juxtaposition of images of horror and the ordinary, achieved through radical approaches to montage, disorientation, camera movements, and a counterpointed commentary to produce a film of warnings, hauntings, existential anxiety, and terror (Brown and Rafter 2013, 1021). Ominous and aesthetically rich, the film leads the viewer to a “comprehension of the incommensurable” through its combination of image selection, spoken word, choice of musical approach and camera work (Renov 1993, 30). Widely admired and understood as path-breaking though the film is, it may have established conventions so firmly as to make alternate approaches to the same subject matter challenging to identify. *Night and Fog* set, in Brian Winston’s view, a certain standard of how the crimes of the Nazis could be depicted, and this led to difficulties in breaking with the established formula thenceforth. Having worked on Holocaust documentary accounts himself in the mid-1980s, Winston worried about an oversimplification of the Holocaust to a contest between Nazis and Jews (despite Resnais never directly referencing Jews in his film) and in so doing evacuating the politics from the industrialized policies of slaughter (and presumably other genocides). Winston’s concern is that unquestioned conventions lead to the production of Holocaust industry documentaries (Winston 2012, 102).

Thirty years later, *Shoah* defied the conventions of *Night and Fog* and succeeds partly because it eschews the liberation archive; director Claude Lanzmann judged audiences to have been anaesthetized by such images (Brown and Rafter 2013, 1022). They had become, in his view, Holocaust wallpaper, their affective capacity leached (Winston 2012, 100). Lanzmann instead draws upon the power of the testimony of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders to achieve the force of his film. Concerned about the inability of the purely visual to capture the nature of what happened in the camps, Lanzmann develops a range of other techniques that give his testimonial approach greater effect. These include long, painful interviews, the duration of the film itself (some nine and a half hours), repetition,

rhythm, and the confronting of places and the faces and voices of survivors, perpetrators, and those marginally involved to bring the experiences recounted into a present that cannot or has not processed them (Brown and Rafter 2013, 1022–23). Lanzmann also includes the testimony of perpetrators in his film, interviews often obtained through the artifice of a hidden camera, and it is this component of *Shoah* that most explicitly links it to the TAOK. 5

### The Act of Killing (TAOK)

Despite being little remembered outside Indonesia, the massacres of the mid-1960s are constitutive of the contemporary Indonesian state. Suharto's New Order arose from the elimination of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), which it argued was responsible for the political and economic chaos that preceded the great crackdown. There has been no apology for what happened, no reconciliation between the antagonists, no truth commissions, and no prosecutions. Indeed, as Gerry van Klinken argues: "Indonesia's most intractable political problem today is the strength of commitment within the 'deep state' to the violent suppression of dissident views" (van Klinken 2014, 177). 10 15

"Dissident views" took many different forms during the Suharto era, but the regime discursively worked the idea of "threat" into the very core of its diligent and authoritarian maintenance of order. Islamic radicals, liberal moderates, social democrats, and separatists were all regarded with suspicion and frequently dealt with violently, but it was the potential return of communism that the New Order repeatedly ventriloquized to justify the need for endless vigilance. It produced and reproduced the threat of communism throughout the thirty-two years of the Suharto presidency (see McGregor [2016]). On Leslie Dwyer's reading, the New Order government's official narrative that it saved the nation from communism is "a brutal fiction secured by a vicious erasure of state violence" (Dwyer 2014, 184). 20 25 However, since the fall of Suharto there has also been an enormous proliferation of media, in a wide variety of formats, operating with a great deal more freedom than was the case during the New Order years. Activists, filmmakers, and novelists have taken advantage of this new, if uncertain, openness to explore the events of 1965–1966 albeit without, as yet, much insight into the politics of the PKI. Such space has even led to the production of a number of respected documentary films dealing with the massacres (McGregor 2016, 252–53). However, the extent and effectiveness of the debate they have generated remains unclear. In Heryanto's view, this is because such films, devoted as they are to the personal experiences of older, frail, frightened people in "talking heads" formats, are of little interest to younger Indonesians who have only sketchy knowledge of, and little interest in, the massacres (Heryanto 2012, 226–28). However, more recently, interest in, and concern about, the massacres has grown. Activists, researchers, artists, filmmakers, and novelists continue to be intimidated, but increasing numbers of Indonesians are reviewing their knowledge of the killings as more information and interpretation becomes publicly available (see Roosa [2016]). Beyond Indonesia, an International People's Tribunal was held November 10–13, 2015, at The Hague, to develop an accurate record of the killings and to examine evidence for whether crimes against humanity were committed (Sekretariat 2016). 30 35 40 45

Joshua Oppenheimer plays a part in extending awareness of these traumatic events by confronting the silences surrounding the massacres and their long-term effects on the Indonesian polity. His initial ambition to make a film about survivors living among perpetrators of violence was thwarted, as attempts to interview and film people were routinely disrupted by local people opposed to his project, by police, by militia and other shadowy forces (van Munster and Sylvest 2015, 204). On the verge of abandoning his film, 50

Oppenheimer was advised by an Indonesian colleague to refocus his efforts on the exploits of perpetrators. Oppenheimer approached this task with little optimism, believing that few, if any, perpetrators would openly canvass their crimes. However, he found many were more than willing to discuss their past activities and not least because they perceived themselves as having engaged in heroic action to save the nation from the scourge of communism (van Munster and Sylvest 2015, 204). 5

Oppenheimer challenges many of the conventions of genocide films in two principal ways. First, he exclusively focuses on perpetrators who willingly discuss their involvement in killing large numbers of people accused of being communists. Second, Oppenheimer facilitates the confessions of his interlocutors by enabling them to demonstrate their killings. This leads to a small group of them re-enacting their killings in the mode of Hollywood genre films: Western, film noir, gangster, supernatural thrillers. The film centers primarily on Anwar Congo, an older man of unspecified age who, ~~early in the film,~~ quite cheerfully confesses to having murdered in excess of a thousand people and, equally happily, demonstrates the garroting technique that he used to ensure that he kept his clothes and person clean and free of blood. As the film unfolds, we see Congo moving around the Northern Sumatran city of Medan, where he is both a minor celebrity and clearly associated with a militia group and thugs who extort money from Chinese shopkeepers in a local market. It is not clear whether his celebrity arises from his former activities (though given that we see him interviewed on a local television chat show about his killing, it may well be so) or from his notoriety because of his gang and militia activities. 10 15 20

On my reading of the film, Oppenheimer is not only aware of the very obvious political constraints that so complicated his filmmaking attempts, but sensitive to the difficulties of having perpetrators speak of their crimes in a straightforward, descriptive fashion. One wonders if this is why Oppenheimer resorts to sublimation as his primary technique. Mary Zurbuchen suggests of the Indonesian survivors that it is difficult, risky, and complex for them to attempt to recount the past. Those “‘who have survived traumatic experiences may be unable or unwilling to express themselves,’ even in the ideal circumstances of liberalism” (Heryanto 2012, 233). Is it possible the same is true of perpetrators and that what we witness in the film is the provision of a unique language in which to speak the ineffable? Like Lanzmann, Oppenheimer does not use any footage depicting the events themselves (none is known to exist),<sup>2</sup> but unlike Lanzmann, who relies primarily on witness and participant testimony, Oppenheimer creatively transgresses the boundary between objectivism and the composition of a poetic fiction about the massacres (Heryanto 2014, 163). In this respect at least, Oppenheimer may be in accordance with Paul Tickell’s views about the limits of realism’s capacity to depict what, for many victims (and perpetrators), may remain unspeakable (see Tickell [1993]). 25 30 35 40

There is no doubt that having the perpetrators making films within the documentary is highly innovative, if not unique. But there are other issues about Oppenheimer’s *mise-en-scène* that require reflection. From time to time, and especially toward the end of the film when it seems that Congo is in the throes of significant moral discomfort about his earlier activities, Congo addresses Oppenheimer, by name, in direct-to-camera addresses. Indeed, with Oppenheimer off camera, the effect of Congo looking unequivocally into the lens creates the effect of him speaking to us as audience, spectators, viewers, and perhaps voyeurs. In his reflections upon his actions of a half century ago and what may be current introspection, the film partly humanizes Congo and provokes a 45 50

<sup>2</sup>John Roosa notes that no photographs of the massacres are known to exist, and so it is equally unlikely that there is moving footage of the executions (Roosa 2016, 283).

degree of empathy ~~for him~~ as we watch him struggle with his conscience. Oppenheimer's most forceful intervention comes late in the film when Congo claims, after acting out a scene where he is tortured for being an alleged communist, that he finally understands and has empathy for those that he himself brutalized and murdered. It is at this point that Oppenheimer expresses his disbelief that Congo can have experienced anything like the terror of his victims. It is as if at this juncture Oppenheimer is anxious not to let ~~the empathy of~~ the viewer too readily rehabilitate Congo. 5

Herein lies a powerful tension in TAOK. On the one hand, the film proffers a psychological examination of Congo and others engaged in past killing and contemporary thuggery. However, in comparing his work to that of Jean Rouch, Oppenheimer argues that the purpose of documentary is not to attempt an objective account of particular events, but to enter into a performance with one's interlocutor(s), such that the subject of the film may say or do something that s/he may not say or do to the same degree without the presence of the camera. That is, to turn on a camera is to film a performance in which the director is a collaborator. The performance is jointly owned by subject(s) and director in that rushes are shared between filmmaker and subject while, of course, overall editorial control remains with the director. Invoking his interest in theoretical physics, Oppenheimer argues that observing disturbs the nature of the observed and the filmmaker, like the physicist, must accept that s/he deals with a crisis of objectivity. There is no single reality that the filmmaker seeks to uncover but rather an almost innumerable number of fragmentary molecular interacting fantasies, stories, narratives, and fictions (van Munster and Sylvest 2015, 201–3). As such, his account of Congo somewhat hesitantly attempts to frame Congo's reality on its own terms, resisting the simple step of moral condemnation (despite Oppenheimer's protestation when Congo professes an affective experience of the communist other when having mock violence enacted upon him). 15 20 25

On the other hand, when viewed as an aesthetic rather than psychological subject, Congo presents in a significantly different light. Here is where Oppenheimer's stated claim that he resists the temptation to make Congo different, to put distance between himself and the murderer, is less persuasive. On Mike Shapiro's account it is not the inner motivations of subjects that should be the focus of analysis when viewing a film such as TAOK, but their capacity as aesthetic subjects whose movements and actions reveal much about the world they inhabit and create (Shapiro 2013, 11). Thus, while Oppenheimer ~~creates~~ a great deal of ambiguity about Congo's psychic state, no such ambivalence pertains regarding the Indonesia ~~of~~ which Congo, his fellow murderers and thugs, and their supporters in different sectors and tiers of Indonesian society, have ~~created~~ from the events of 1965–1966. In this Indonesia, Congo and his collaborators move brazenly around the world they were midwives to with their killings. They extort money from Chinese shopkeepers, visit the offices of local media owners and senior regional politicians. They appear on television to relive and share their experiences of killing ~~through the electronic media~~. They perform re-enactments of their murders that traumatize at least some of those dragooned into these staged events. In this Indonesia it is the "winners" who speak (a point forcefully made by Adi Zulkadry, one of Congo's co-killers from the 1960s), the perpetrators of crimes who have access to various nodes of power, the unreconstructed who continue to remake Indonesia in their own image. No one else is seen or heard. In this Indonesia, there is no resistance, no counter-narrative, and no space of, and for, survivors of the mass killings. As such, Oppenheimer forecloses on the possibility of an aesthetic interrogation of Congo's Indonesia and instead passes judgment upon it and its stewards, seemingly choking off the possibility of that which he seeks to initiate: acknowledgment, debate, and reform. Through his treatment 30 35 40 45 50



of Congo, Oppenheimer fails to broaden the atrocity problematic per se, instead narrowing it and intensifying the experience of the viewer to a particular moment (Shapiro 2015, 5). For non-Indonesian viewers, that may confine the politics of the mass killings to Indonesia. For Indonesian viewers, it perhaps unhelpfully entrenches the perpetrator/victim binary. 5

In a sense, the film helps consolidate the important idea that there is no necessary relationship between revelations of crime and injustice and the truth leading to justice. The truth does not necessarily galvanize and lead to the kind of closure so familiar in commercially oriented productions (Heryanto 2014, 163–64). Rather, TAOK “works” and unsettles because it does not present viewers with the opportunity for passive consumption of violent images, but rather confronts with jarring juxtapositions: terror and its garish aesthetics, deadly enmity and riotous humor, deep emotion and utter banality, and all this in the context of a hallucinogenic re-enactment of the killings (Dwyer 2014, 183). The film is also discomfiting precisely because it leaves the viewer with unmet expectations. The film is a kind of advocacy on the part of those killed, but in an unaccustomed form, and so is difficult to interpret (Hearman 2014, 174–75). Yet the film can be argued to incorporate all four elements of Renov’s classification of documentary tendencies: it certainly seeks to preserve the memory of the mass killings and to reveal them to a wider audience. It aims to persuade and promote, and in this regard has the features of a Grierson-like documentary as hammer. It is deeply self-aware of its expressive and communicative dimensions, but it is not as obvious that the film openly engages with its own limited reading of Indonesian political history. That is, it is not clear that the documentary interrogates its own revelations as honestly as it could. And this includes the lack of examination of Congo’s claims (Cribb 2014, 147–48). 10 15 20 25

Oppenheimer describes the film as his love letter to Indonesia and is explicit about his ambitions for the film to generate debate among Indonesians; he hopes that it will lead to greater openness and even an apology on the part of the state. The film is also concerned to expose the complicity of countries that supported the Suharto regime and its virulent anti-communist politics, though activism of this sort is arguably secondary to Oppenheimer’s concerns. But if the film is primarily for Indonesians, its presentation of highly complex events may undermine its credibility and utility as a tool to promote dialogue. As Laurie Sears suggests, while elements of the *mise-en-scène* may appear absurdist to Euro-American audiences, it may speak a very different message to Indonesians. 30 35

This is the power of film, whether documentary, blockbuster, or art film: it tells different stories to different audiences . . . Who was punished and who survived is amply demonstrated in Oppenheimer’s film. There is a great disconnect that I fear gives exactly the wrong message to Indonesian audiences watching the film. (Sears 2014, 205) 40

Galuh Wandita endorses this concern, noting that in a country that has blamed the victims for the atrocities of the mid-1960s, an Indonesian audience may struggle to understand the use of irony in the film (Wandita 2014, 169). Many commentators, both Indonesian and other, have expressed reservations that the film highlights the impunity with which the former killers live their lives and continue to terrorize in the present (Cribb 2014, 148–49; Hearman 2014, 171; van Klinken 2014, 177; McGregor 2014, 189). Indeed, Ariel Heryanto argues that the film is “an obscene testimony to the absolute impunity enjoyed by the politicians-cum-gangsters, who continue to run the country, nearly half a century later” (Heryanto 2014, 163). Thus, it remains an open question as to whether showing the lives of those whose violence continues to straddle petty criminality to the crushing of dissent is enabling. 45 50



Oppenheimer's decision to decontextualize the mass murders by focusing only on the activities of Congo and his friends is, arguably, misleading to the point of historically distorting. That is, the activities of the Indonesian military form no part of his depictions of the massacres (Cribb 2014, 147; van Klinken 2014, 176; Wandita 2014, 168). The danger in this omission is that the film can be read as implying that the mass killings were the work of criminal psychopaths, rather than a campaign of extermination authorized and actively encouraged by a group within the military aspiring to power. As Galuh Wandita suggests: "the film is in danger of depicting the mass killings ... as if it were the spontaneous works of mad men, the version of history that the Indonesian military promotes" (Wandita 2014, 168). Indeed, as Robert Cribb observes:

At a time when a growing body of detailed research on the killings has made clear that the army played a pivotal role in the massacres, TAOK puts back on the agenda the Orientalist notion that Indonesians slaughtered each other with a casual self-indulgence because they did not value human life. (Cribb 2014, 147)

In this way, the film constructs Indonesia as a gangster's paradise, full of people ignorant of their history, and leaves little room for Indonesians to contest these claims. Indonesians on this view are as yet undemocratic, unenlightened, and in need of the guiding hand of the caring outsider to achieve positive change (Dag Yngvesson cited in Dwyer [2014, 187]). As John Roosa sharply observes: "It is not as if barbarism is casually accepted in Indonesia as an everyday matter and stranglings are no more shocking than the slicing of cabbages in the kitchen" (Roosa 2014, 180). On this basis the film "ultimately fails as a transformative intervention, instead giving strength to the exclusion of activist voices from Indonesia's political sphere and resurrecting colonial-era narratives of a barbaric 'heart of darkness' penetrable only by the civilizing eye of the Western camera" (Dwyer 2014, 184). The survivors, their children, and their grandchildren have memories, have not forgotten, but their memories do not always take on easily digestible testimonial forms and the film does nothing to explore ~~the possibility of~~ other forms of testimony (Dwyer 2014, 187).

For these reasons, and despite it being uniquely conceived and executed, the film lapses into an Orientalist account of Indonesia. As Laurie Sears notes, it is inconceivable that a film focused on aged Nazis, reminiscing about their slaughter of Jews (and others) while interrogating Americans about their treatment of Indigenous American populations to justify their actions, would go unremarked (see Sears 2014, 205–6). Would not a documentary that enabled service personnel or military contractors to re-enact their activities at Guantanamo Bay or Abu Ghraib without some sense of the broader political context generate dismay? That TAOK primarily provokes responses about the events it depicts but not the broader historical claims it implies, suggests an overly passive acceptance of some conventional Orientalist tropes about the Indonesian other. On my reading, the film, while unique in conception and aesthetically rich, is not enabling of the kind of political action necessary to redress the violence of the Indonesian state (Dwyer 2014, 184). It is possible, therefore, that TAOK fails the key test of any documentary film that negotiates trauma. That is, the purpose of such a film is to make meaningful in the present the particular events documented, to preserve their memory and to provide an interpretation of history, while such bearing witness also needs to be sensitive to, even therapeutic for, the traumatized (Winston 2012, 109). It is far from clear to me that TAOK can make this claim.

### Conclusion

There can be no doubting that TAOK is a significant accomplishment in filmmaking. It may be unique in the ways it addresses mass murder. However, my admiration for its achievements is outweighed by a range of concerns about its depiction of Indonesia and Indonesians. Late in the film Oppenheimer returns Congo to the rooftop where, earlier ~~in the film~~, the latter had cheerfully demonstrated his garroting technique. Upon return (and we have no way of knowing when in the process of making this film the scene was shot), it is a far more somber Congo who reminisces about his activities on that rooftop all those years ago. As he describes what happened and expresses some sense of remorse, Congo begins violently dry-retching as if finally confronted by the monstrosity of his actions. This may or may not be indicative of genuine sorrow and awareness on the part of Congo. However, it is structured into the film in such a way that it appears as though it is the film and filmmaker that have brought about change in the consciousness of the mass murderer, Congo. As my references to Indonesia specialists throughout this article imply, I am not the only critic with concerns about the ways the film locates the filmmaker as having acted politically and having made change possible (see Dwyer [2014, 185–86]). That is, despite Oppenheimer's warm recognition of the many Indonesians who participated in the filmmaking but who are not named for fear of the ramifications for them and their families, it is Oppenheimer's presence in the film, and his subsequent advocacy on the part of victims, that position Oppenheimer as the enabling political actor. Despite the repression, despite the imposed silences, despite the state-sponsored erasure of its violence from the formative moment of the contemporary Indonesian state, the film's implication that it has restored speech, broken the silence, and recovered memory needs to be treated with the utmost caution.

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